



Ablaze with a history

By MARYBETH VARCADOS
Living Section Editor

CAPT. JERRY OCHOA'S all fired up over the history of firefighting in Santa Cruz. He wants to spark some community support to organize and present it to the public through the county Historical Trust.

That's why Ochoa, 10 years with Santa Cruz Fire Department and past president of the firefighter's union, will give a talk at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the upstairs meeting room of the Public Library, 224 Church St.

Alert firemen pose one major question in this snapshot from a 1932 parade — who are they? Anyone know?

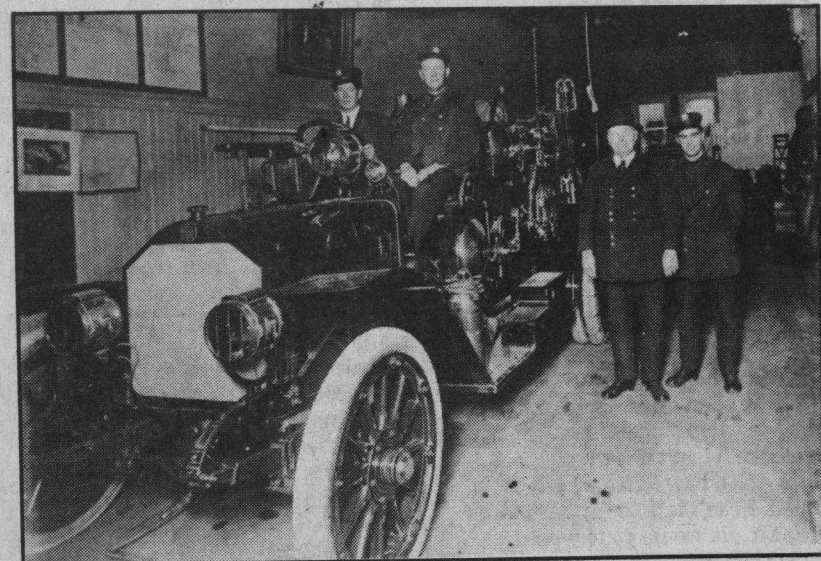
"There are a lot of gaps," he says about records of early firefighting and firefighters — undeniably a romantic segment of a community's history.

Early photographs and artifacts are spread through neighborhood fire departments; there are 17 in the county. Unfortunately, says Ochoa, the collection has never been inventoried and catalogued. The downtown firehouse on Cedar Street is a treasure trove for history buffs.

Ochoa uses the photographs to illustrate his point. "Here's the burning casino of 1906. We wonder if anyone is still alive who was actually there." He produces "mystery" photographs, like one taken at a parade in 1932. The posing firefighters are unidentified.

Ochoa's confident once people hear about the history project, they'll come forward and offer information. "Maybe people who attend Wednesday can fill in details and work with our retirees," he said.

The Fire Department's collection



Still around the 1925 La France, pictured at the old Church Street station (now Leask's shoe department).

of artifacts and memorabilia from various eras includes old call boxes, primitive sprinkler systems, helmets and polished hose nozzles, lanterns and badges.

Perhaps citizens will add to the collection, he hopes. Ochoa hopes the city ultimately will have a building to house the collections, and especially to house several historical vehicles being restored in a garage at the West Side Station. There are two 19th century hosecarts (one from Santa Cruz and one from Santa Clara County), a 1925 La France and a 1935 Mack fire truck that was used by the department until 1971. A 1929 La France ladder and 1955 Seagraves are still around as reserve equipment, but will go to the collection when they are retired from duty.

Speaking of retirees, Ochoa says he hopes that old-time firefighters will show up at his talk and slide show Wednesday. Tom Zehrung, who retired this year after 20 years in the department, has helped compile the slide show, which will include a picture of the fire of 1894 that destroyed an entire block of downtown Santa Cruz.

FIREFIGHTING IN America can be traced, unevenly, to colonial times when every house was required to have a filled bucket. When an alarm sounded, everyone rushed out with water and helped out.

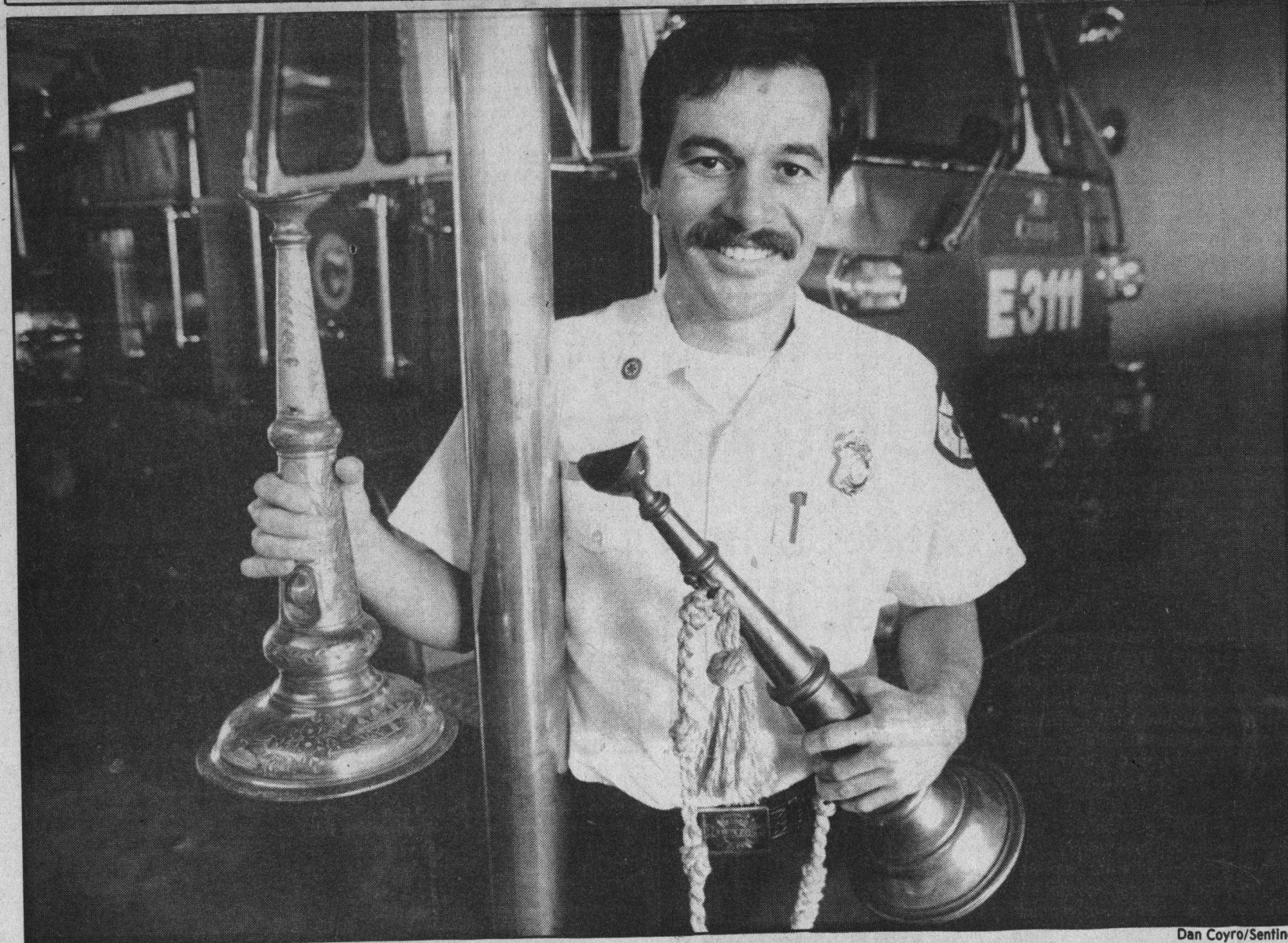
That led to volunteer firefighting. Santa Cruz' volunteer teams were organized around the 1870s, according to Ochoa. They bore such names as the Pogonip Hose Company, the Alerts, Santa Cruz Hook and Ladder Company and the Pilot Hose Company. "They began as social, fraternal organizations," he added.

Watsonville Fire Department is ahead of Santa Cruz in its historical organization, Ochoa thinks. "I suspect Watsonville may have been organized earlier," he says. He also suspects that Santa Cruz had an excellent water system in those early days, because although a pump truck was used in the south county, Santa Cruz apparently didn't purchase one until after the turn of the century.

The Watsonville department, Ochoa adds, has the great prize. Kept in security is a Diamond Belt dating from the 1880s, prize of early firemen's musters. The first county department to win the belt three times in a row became its permanent owner, and Santa Cruz lost it to the Pajaro Valley.

But Santa Cruz has treasures, too, including two silver trumpets, used by the chiefs to shout orders to the team. One is engraved with the names of the volunteer chiefs up to the 1890s, when the chief's position became a paying job.

"Our biggest priority," says Ochoa, "is restoring the Mack, and getting display cases and felt boards for mounting items. We could use more photographs, and we need answers about photographs we do have."



Capt. Jerry Ochoa, left, poses by the only firehouse pole in the county, at the downtown fire station. Silver trumpets are part of the department's collection, which needs to be organized, Ochoa says.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel